



TIPS FOR COPING WITH DROUGHT-RELATED STRESS

FARM STRESS AND DISASTER STRESS



Disasters create stress in our lives. For farmers and people in agricultural industries, drought adds to other stresses already experienced by farm families.

Stressors identified by farm families ¹	
<i>Farm-specific worries</i>	<i>Worries shared with most families</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Rising expenses & low prices• Concerns about farm finances• Machinery breakdown• Prolonged bad weather or natural disaster• Weather-related crop loss• Delay in planting/harvest• Time pressures & long work hours• Farm viability	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Death in family• Divorce or separation• Major illness or disability• Aging parents who need care• Worries about owing money• Few vacations• Changing economic conditions

Studies show that stress may be even greater for young farmers, farmers holding a second off-farm job and women in farm families.

Drought stress may be different than stress in other disasters because a drought is an extended event and does not have a single moment of impact. The anxiety builds over time and becomes chronic, making it less noticeable to ourselves and those around us. The drought may not be viewed as seriously as a tornado because the damage is not as visible and its impact is worst for already stressed farm families and communities.

SIGNS OF STRESS

Some common signs of distress are:

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| ✓ Irritability and anger | ✓ Forgetfulness |
| ✓ Feelings of anxiety & worry | ✓ Fatigue |
| ✓ Headaches or gastrointestinal complaints | ✓ Sense of helplessness |
| ✓ Increased risk-taking behavior | ✓ Lack of concentration |
| ✓ Changes in eating & sleep habits | ✓ Avoidance or denial |
| ✓ Increased alcohol or drug use | ✓ Sadness |

Farmers and their families should remind themselves that these are common stress reactions and that they are not “going crazy”. It is important to recognize that these are normal responses to an unusual situation.

¹ Walker and Walker, 1987 and 2003 USDA Small Farm Digest.

WHAT CAN WE DO ABOUT STRESS?

If stress goes unrecognized, it can affect our mental and physical health. If we learn to cope with stress, we can better face the challenges each day brings and can be even stronger when we face other difficult circumstances in life. Focusing on our own strengths and our community of support, we can take steps to help ourselves and our families by:

- ***Acknowledging feelings and talking them out.*** Family, friends and neighbors can be helpful listeners and may share some of the same worries. Participating in church or spiritual renewal activities can also be sources of comfort and assistance in difficult times.
- ***Paying attention to health, nutritious diet and adequate sleep is important.*** Engaging in recreation or a favorite hobby, getting away for a few hours with close friends, reading a good book, volunteering to help others, and finding time to laugh can help.
- ***Nurturing personal relationships should be a priority.*** Couples should make time to be alone, to talk and to have fun. Families should re-establish important rituals such as mealtimes and holiday celebrations. Listening to and reassuring children who may need additional support is also important.

The good news is that, with time, we will bounce back and return to what is normal for us and our families.

WHEN SHOULD WE SEEK HELP?

If stress, anxiety, depression or physical problems continue for more than a few weeks or if someone is having feelings of extreme hopelessness or extreme anger, talking about suicide or is violent, it is important to seek help immediately. Contact a physician or community mental health center as soon as possible.

HOW CAN WE FIND WHAT HELP IS AVAILABLE?

Information about community mental health services in Missouri can be found at www.dmh.mo.gov or by calling 1-800-364-9687.



Web Resource Listing for Stress Management for Farm Families

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<http://www.gov.mb.ca/agriculture/homeec/index.html>

Provides a listing of fifteen linked self-help documents related to family farm stress including coping with farming pressures, fostering family strengths and coping with change. Includes quizzes and worksheets for problem solving and stress management.

www.agriwellness.org

An organization that promotes mental health service availability for farm families in Iowa provides newsletters and information related to stress and access to services for farm families through the seven-state program called Sowing the Seeds of Hope.

<http://extension.missouri.edu/main/family/index.shtml>

An index of articles provided by the University of Missouri Cooperative Extension system that address strong families and programs to help families cope.

<http://www.uwex.edu/ces/ag/issues/stress-safety/index.html>

This site for the University of Wisconsin Extension offices provides an index of resources for recognizing, responding to and relieving stress targeted for farm families. Select the checklist PDF for a brief fact sheet on warning signs that people need assistance and referral steps for people who may be depressed or suicidal.

<http://www.fse.missouri.edu/Agrability/new/>

The Missouri Agrability site describes extension services and resources available to help persons with disabilities remain in agriculture.

<http://bse.wisc.edu/agrability/>

This is the home page for Agrability, a Wisconsin organization associated with the University of Wisconsin Cooperative Extension that promotes success in agriculture for people with disabilities and their families. A July 2003 newsletter highlights the issue of Coping with stress.

<http://safety.coafes.umn.edu/farmalarm/index.html>

University of Minnesota Extension Service sponsors Farm Alarm: Coping with Stress, a program that includes an 8 page brochure link that addresses farm-related stress issues and coping skills.

<http://www.oznet.ksu.edu/library/famlf2/mf1062.pdf>

A guide for helping farm families in distress has been developed by the Cooperative Extension Service of Kansas State University and posted as a publication on their web site. The four page brochure includes listening skills and a referral guide for people who need more assistance.